





0 011 642 653 5



P

E 100
spec

LETTER OF ERASMUS RASK

TO

HENRY WHEATON.

REPRINTED FROM THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY FOR APRIL, 1880.

E105
P28

P
E 105
R22

Mr. G. DEXTER communicated a letter from Professor Erasmus Rask to the Hon. Henry Wheaton, saying:—

I have found lately among some papers of the late Henry Wheaton, for many years the diplomatic representative of this country at the courts of Copenhagen and Berlin, an interesting letter written to him in 1831 by Erasmus Rask on the subject of the discovery of America by the Northmen. Mr. Rask is recognized as one of the great philological scholars of his time, and he was particularly well acquainted with the Icelandic language and literature, on which he wrote several treatises. Mr. Wheaton, at the date of this letter, had just published in London his history of the Northmen. He had made due mention in this of their visits to America, and as it was a matter in which he took great interest, he was now perhaps seeking more information from his friend.

I do not forget that this letter of Mr. Rask was written before the publication of Professor Rafn's great work, the "*Antiquitates Americanæ*," which appeared in 1837. Nor am I unaware that Mr. Wheaton himself, in the French trans-

* Westfield was incorporated as a town in 1669, but the church was not gathered until 27 August, 1674, at which time a council assembled, and Mr. Taylor was ordained pastor, nearly eight years after he began his ministrations. See "*The Westfield Jubilee*," pp. 151, 165. Mr. Taylor's tomb is in the old town burying-ground, and a marble memorial slab has been placed in the First Congregational Church. — Ems.

lation of his history, published in 1844, which was substantially a revised edition of the original work, adopted Mr. Rafn's views.*

But the "*Antiquitates Americanae*" was as it were a new departure in these Northern studies. For the first time the sagas were given to the world, carefully edited and translated into a language read by the learned of all countries. The completeness and splendor of the manner of publication of the book, the ability of the editors, and, above all, their earnest enthusiasm, seemed to carry all before them for a time. Nearly every one was disposed to accept the narratives of the sagas, and to agree with the plausibly argued conclusions of the Danish editors. There was perhaps also a feeling of patriotic pride among the Northern scholars, that their ancestors had preceded Columbus in the discovery of the new world. Certainly no attempt was made in Denmark to refute Rafn's arguments, and the Royal Society of Northern Antiquaries at once appointed a committee on the ante-Columbian discovery of America, and established an American section of the Museum, in which supposed traces of the Northmen's visits were to be preserved.

To-day, however, while the visits of these Northmen to some parts of the American continent are perhaps generally admitted by careful historians, scholars have grown very cautious in accepting the details of the narratives, and reluctant to receive Professor Rafn's identification of the places visited by Leif and Thorvald.

Dighton Rock and the old mill at Newport, on which so much argument was built, have been abandoned. There exist no known works of the Northmen in the United States. Mr. Schoolcraft and Dr. Palfrey have settled that point. The lapse of forty years since the appearance of Mr. Rafn's labors has made it evident also that another of his conclusions may be doubted. He and his coadjutor, Professor Finn Magnusen, have endeavored in learned arguments to show that the precise latitude of "*Leifsbúdir*" can be deduced from the statement in the saga of the length of the winter's day. The testimony of the exact scholar whose letter I have brought

* Mr. Paul Guillot, the translator of Mr. Wheaton's history, calls his book on the titlepage, "*édition revue et augmentée par l'auteur, avec cartes, inscriptions, et alphabet runiques.*" And in his preface he states that the book is "*moins une traduction qu'une nouvelle édition, enrichi des notes et des recherches que l'auteur réservait pour une seconde publication.*" An appendix of new matter, of about one hundred pages, is taken from Rafn's "*Antiquitates Americanae.*" The summary of Finn Magnusen's argument about the length of the winter day is given on p. 53 n.

here to-day may be of value on that point. And I may recall the fact that Mr. Gudbrand Vigfussen, the editor of Cleasby's Icelandic Dictionary, the latest authority, states that the editor of the "*Antiquitates Americanæ*" is mistaken in this matter.

Mr. Rask's letter, admirably expressed when we remember that he writes in a tongue not his native one, is as follows:—

KØBENHAVN, d^{br}. 29 Dec., 1831.

The fact of the Icelanders and Greenlanders visiting North America, which they called *Wineland the Good* (in comparison with Iceland and Greenland), is beyond any doubt. It is mentioned *obiter*:—

1. In the *Landnámabok*, twice (pp. 133, 219, 220). This is one of the best-authenticated sagas existing, published from parchment codices.

2. In the new edition of Olaf Tryggvason's saga, published also from parchment (manuscript), vol. ii. p. 246, equally *obiter*, and just on that behalf the surer. A specimen of the very respectable chief codex is to be seen in the Olaf the Saint's saga, which is printed from the same.

3. *Eyrbyggja-saga*, p. 252, is also spoken of *Vinland hit góða*, briefly indeed, but very much corroborating the other accounts. There is in this place related a battle between the Northmen and the Eskimoes (*Skrælingjar*), in which a person fell whose history is related in the saga, the author speaking no wise else in that place of Vinland. This saga is also one of the most creditable, though but indifferently published; it exists, at least partly, on parchment.

4. Snorre Sturleson in his celebrated *Heimskringla*, vol. i. p. 303, mentions *obiter* the discovery of *Vinland hit góða*, made by Leif Erikson from Greenland. This chapter contains the genuine words of Snorre himself, and exists on parchment, as well as in the other transcripts, as may be seen, *l.c.*, in the various readings. The detailed relation, inserted from other sources, begins on the next page (304), as is fairly stated in the note relating to the beginning of chapter 105.

5. Are-fróde in his *Islandíngabók* or *schedæ*, chap. vi. (p. 9 in the new octavo edition of *Islandíngasögur*, vol. i.), mentions also *Vinland*, *obiter*, as a country well known. When the Icelanders discovered Greenland, they found both on the eastern and western coast traces (dwellings) of "men of the same race," he says, "as inhabits Vinland, and is called *Skrælingjar* by the (Scandinavian, northern) Greenlanders."

The whole discovery, or several expeditions to Vinland, is described:—

1. In the celebrated *Flateybook*, where it is inserted in the saga of Olaf Tryggvason. From a bad transcript of this it was published first by Peringsköld in his edition of *Heimskringla*, and afterward by the Danish editors.

2. In Erik the Red's saga the discovery is spoken of, chap. v. (in my manuscript copy); and another expedition from Greenland to Vinland is detailed, chap. vii. *et seq.* In this expedition was discovered some interjacent countries: 1. *Helluland*, twenty-four hours' journey from Greenland; then, two days' journey farther, with north wind, *Markland*,* and an island *Bjarney*, &c.; twenty-four hours farther, *Straumsey* and *Straumsfjördr*, &c. At last the battle with the natives, in which the Icelandic fell who is spoken of in *Eyrbyggja-saga*, is described in the ninth and last chapter. This saga appears to be somewhat fabulous, viz., written long time after the event, and taken from tradition.

3. Thorfinn Karlsefnes-saga is the story of the chief hero who went to Wineland the Good. It exists on one or two very old and most excellent parchment codices. The two last mentioned are not published.

It is remarkable that besides of *Vinland* there is an old tradition of another extensive country in the west, called *Hvítra-manna-land* (White men's land), or Ireland the Great (*vaste*), *Írland hit mikla*. In the first place of *Landnámabók* quoted above, it is spoken of as situated right west of Ireland, and not far from Vinland the Good.† The people were civilized and Christians (it seems) before the Icelanders. Of course, I mean Irishmen or Welshmen, rather the first mentioned, as they also had begun to people the southern parts of Iceland before the arrival of the Northmen (according to *Are-frode*, *Landnámabók*, &c.). This country is also mentioned in the last chapter of *Eyrbyggja*, in *Eriksrauda-saga*, &c.

I think it tolerably clear in general that it was the country of Labrador, with the islands adjacent, and perhaps Nova Scotia, that were visited by the Northmen. *Straumsfjördr*, I fancy, was the Bay of St. Lawrence, and that *Hvítra-manna-land*, or *Írland hit mikla*, was the northern parts, or the whole then known of the United States, where the Irish or Welsh colonies have been afterward destroyed by the natives, or lost among them, just like the Icelandic colonies in Greenland.

But to ascertain exactly the places meant by the names of *Helluland*, *Markland*, *Straumsey*, and *Vinland*, is next to impossibility until the text of *Eriksrauda-saga* and *Thorfinn Karlsefnes-saga* shall be published critically in the work of Professors Magnúsen and Rafn, with Latin translations. Then, I fancy, a person who knows the natural appearance of the coast of Labrador, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, &c., will be able to ascertain the places tolerably correctly from the descrip-

* Because it was covered "with wood" (*ísl.* *mörn*, *silva*, non danish *Mark*, *campus*). — *Marginul note of Mr. Rask.*

† Some captivated children from Vinland state it situated right against their native country (on the southern banks of the St. Lawrence?), and that the inhabitants wore *white* dresses; but I would rather derive the name from the complexion of the Europeans, so that *Hvítra-manna-land* would be the country occupied by Europeans; and, supposed these were Irishmen, it would be perfectly synonymous with *Írland hit mikla*. — *Marginul note of Mr. Rask.*

tions given of each of them in the sagas, — never from the length of the shortest day, it being liable to so different interpretations. Our ancestors did not divide the day into twelve hours, but into four *eykts*, each of three hours. *Hádegi* (high day) was twelve o'clock; *nón* (or in ancient times, *undorn*) was three o'clock (*hora nona*); *miðr-aþtan*, six o'clock; *náttmál*, nine o'clock; *miðnætt*, twelve o'clock (or midnight); *óttá* (whence *óttasaungr*), three in the morning; *miðr morgun*, six o'clock; *dagmál*, nine o'clock. But now the question is whether midday, for instance, was in the very beginning of the *eykt* called *hádegi*, or in the middle, or even end of it. The two first-mentioned modes of reckoning have prevailed in Iceland till of late, but who shall tell us which of the three possible modes has been intended by the author in question? Besides, this author is not published critically from the *membrana*, — does not say how many *eyktir* the shortest day had, but at what time the sun did set and rise. However, I think that not easily any better explanation of the passage alluded to shall be found than that of Torfæus, given at the end of his *Vinlandia*, — at least not before the texts of these relations shall be published. As my time does not permit me to enter into any examination of the manuscripts, being partly preserved in the Royal Library, I shall send you the work of Torfæus, which contains much curious information about those regions.

From this you will see that even *Adamus Bremensis* mentions Vinland as the utmost inhabitable country in the world, beyond Iceland and Greenland, only he seems to place it north of Greenland, in which he may have misunderstood King Svend Estridsen, from whom he derived his information, or even this [monarch?] may have been mistaken himself about that distant country, not occupied by any of the crowned heads of Europe.

I wish you a very happy New Year, sir, and have the honor to remain, sir,

Your most obedient servant,

ERASMUS RASK.







LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 011 642 653 5